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within our own time wonderful progress in things both useful and ornamental, we feel a conviction that there will still be progress in other things, — in all things that are desirable and necessary to a people, especially to one so separated as we are from others. If we were immediately surrounded, as each nation of Europe is, by kindred nations advanced and advancing together, some in one branch of attainment and some in another, there would be a tolerable certainty of progress in all. As it is, we must, of necessity, find the impulse for every improvement within ourselves, and perhaps the rest of the world will have a little consideration for us on this ground, and will not laugh at us more than we can bear, because we do not quite come up to our own standard. We should despair of our progress, if we had not a mark beyond our present attainment. And here is our great discouragement in respect to the arts in which we have confessed our deficiencies. We fear that there is not a sufficient perception of our wants to stimulate improvement. Yet, as we have intimated, we will not despair. There are symptoms, faint to be sure, of future progress, and we have seen so many and so great improvements in the half-century which we count as our term of life, that we cannot find a place for the word *despair* in our vocabulary.

ART. VI. — *History of the Reign of Philip the Second, King of Spain.* By WILLIAM H. PRESCOTT. Vols. I. and II. Boston : Phillips, Sampson, & Co. 1856. 8vo. pp. 618, 610.

UPON the appearance of these volumes, we were led to defer an extended notice of them, because we were told — on insufficient authority as it seems — that the remaining volumes were to be issued at a very early date. But, apprised of our error, and regretting that we became aware of it too late to retrieve it in our last number, we are unwilling to postpone any longer an expression of the pleasure with which, in common with the universal press on both sides of

the water, we hail each of that series of masterly historical works which have made the name of our countryman classical and immortal. The peculiarity of Mr. Prescott's success is, that it is clear, undisputed, cordially conceded everywhere, and has been from the first. This fact is so remarkable, that it is well worthy of being carefully considered. Like every other effect, in the moral as well as the physical world, it has an adequate cause. If we can discover that cause, we not only account for the particular result in the instance before us, but we find the path that will lead to a similar success those who may adventure in the same field of literary labor.

There are certain points in the case of Mr. Prescott's writings, strikingly distinguishing them from most of those belonging to the same class. They are, in the strictest sense of the term, historical works,—not political, not philosophical, but historical only. The pages exhibit to the mind of the reader the events they narrate and the characters they portray, and nothing else. No man, we think, could conjecture, or find any clew to, Mr. Prescott's personal and private theories of morals, religion, or government, in any part of any one of his historical works. He has not connected the topics he treats with any party or sect or school,—with any fashion of thought or habits of speculation of his own, or of his country or times. Most other writers of history leave everywhere the traces of their own particular notions and prejudices, and present their facts and personages to view through the medium of their favorite views of government, or philosophy, or religion.

The only element that can preserve an historical work from decay, is pure, absolute, unmixed truth. That alone can effectually embalm it. Any varnish which the writer adds, drawn from his own fancy or his own theories, or from the prevalent speculations of his party, sect, or school, while it may render its aspect more pleasing and attractive for the time, will only hasten its dissolution, and doom it to surer oblivion. Certain histories of high celebrity in their day have lost their value, and to a great degree their interest, in consequence of having the personal prejudices and biases of their authors thrown around them, to such an extent as to destroy the confidence

and satisfaction of the reader. If we once discover that such a medium intervenes between us and the events or characters described, all faith is lost; for who can tell how large may be the refracting power of the medium, and how much the images it transmits may be perverted? Works liable to this objection cannot possibly sustain themselves for any considerable length of time. No beauty of style, no brilliancy of illustration, can save them. If not trustworthy and reliable, they must be set aside.

It is sometimes said, in reply to such considerations as these, that it is only necessary for the reader to allow for the opinions and prejudices of the writer, and that, after such deduction, what remains will be the simple and reliable truth. This, however, does not reach the difficulty, or effectually remove it. Partisan views, and favorite theories, if permitted to have any effect, utterly confound and reverse the aspect of things, and so distort the whole course of the narrative,—not only misrepresenting, but misplacing all the details,—that it requires more than any reader can possibly do, to set everything right, and in a right light.

It is undoubtedly true, as many have said, that if a writer cannot avoid coloring his narrative by the reflection of his own private notions and theories, it is by far the most satisfactory that he should make no attempt to conceal his biases, or to restrain their operation upon his writings, but should profess his partisanship, and pretend no more than to give one side of the story. Clarendon is cited as an illustration of this course. His historical remains are indeed intensely interesting; but they are so because they carry us back to his own precise stand-point, and we feel that we are looking at men and things exactly as he looked at them. How far that was their true view, we cannot tell; but in his case, and in the case of every other *ex parte* writer, the more thoroughly we examine the sources of knowledge, and hear all that is said on other sides, the more are our confidence and satisfaction abated. So it is even in reference to events and characters of our own times, passing before our eyes from day to day. What different statements honest but excited men make of the same matters of fact! In what utterly opposite lights do those facts

appear to different beholders while they are actually transpiring! And when we ask how this can be accounted for, the answer is, — and it is the true and adequate answer, — that the contradictory statements and diversities of aspect and observation are owing wholly to the distorting and discolored effect of the prejudices and passions that are the medium through which the diverse and opposing witnesses look at the facts and occurrences. The result of all these considerations and experiences as to the delusiveness of historical compositions has been a growing prejudice against that class of works. This feeling had, indeed, in many minds, induced utter despair of ascertaining and settling the absolute truth in reference to many of the great crises, prominent movements, and leading characters of the world's annals. All demanded the truth, but few continued to expect it. An authentic record of the principal scenes and persons of history was a want which all felt, but which most men feared could never be supplied.

Mr. Prescott has met this want, and has been hailed, from the first, as a fair, just, exact, unbiassed, elaborate, and faithful historian. Everything in his position, and in the style and manner of his writings, conspires to impress this conviction on the mind of the reader. His topics belong to parts of the world, and periods of time, and record the doings of races and characters, in reference to which he stands in an attitude of distant and entire impartiality. No channel of sympathy, drawn from local patriotism, or theological sectarianism, or prejudices of any kind, opens from the men, parties, or movements that he describes, into his own bosom, or connects him with one side more than with another, in any controversy, contest, or doubtful issue. In reference to no one circumstance, and no one person, within the compass of his theme, can he be imagined to have experienced the least conceivable warping inclination, or misleading interest, or influence operating in one direction more than in another.

Then it also served to establish this confidence in Mr. Prescott's fairness and reliableness as an historian, that he did not write in a hurry, but took ample time to do his work well. For years it was announced that he was deliberately preparing his materials, and the narrative is everywhere borne up

by reference to documents and authorities which no expense nor labor was spared to procure, and by explanatory notes, proving that every point, however minute, has been thoroughly scrutinized and fully considered. This patient and persevering industry, it is evident, has never, in any instance, been encountered merely to make out a case, but always for the sole purpose of eliciting and establishing the truth. The style too shows, in every sentence and in every line, that no pains are taken, and no desire entertained, merely to work up a striking passage, or to round an ambitious period, or to add mere ornament to the language, but simply and solely to make that language answer its only legitimate purpose, in conveying the thought lucidly and clearly to the mind of the reader. These indications and features of the work themselves at once confirm the confidence of all men, and constitute a solid ground of assurance that the story is truly told. In this way we explain the fact that the historical writings of Mr. Prescott have, from the first, been received with such entire and universal satisfaction, in America, England, and throughout Europe, and regarded as fully and for ever settling the view to be taken of the passages and periods they profess to exhibit.

These remarks lead to another peculiarity in Mr. Prescott's books, which gives them their pre-eminent value, and suggests an important lesson to all who may enter the field of historical literature. He has not attempted to present the entire history of any nation or race, but has confined his labors, in each instance, to a particular event or movement, or to a single reign. He has taken a single chapter, as it were, in the world's history, and limited the range of his efforts to its complete elucidation. This gives a unity and fulness to his several works, without rendering them too voluminous for agreeable reading. It is very difficult — perhaps it may be found impossible — to collect into one work all the complicated, multifarious, and often dry and uninteresting details that are necessary to present a full and just view of the long-extended annals of a dynasty stretching through ages, without rendering it tedious, voluminous, and forbidding. It will be found, we think, that the body of every nation's history can

be satisfactorily exhibited only in broken parcels, — this writer taking up one fragment, and that another, — this presenting one division of the subject, and that another, — a particular reign or revolution or conquest occupying each a particular work. The constitutional history of a country, for instance, can be fully and satisfactorily given, perhaps, only in a separate treatise presenting that aspect alone. In like manner, a commercial or a military or an industrial history may be best executed by confining the scope of the work to the topics that properly and distinctly belong to it. This will afford room for amplitude of illustration and minuteness of detail, sufficient to convey an adequate conception of the particular subject, without expanding the work to too formidable dimensions, or distracting and confounding the attention of the reader, or breaking down the growing continuity of his interest in the one great theme.

It is because Mr. Prescott has availed himself of this principle that his writings have been so successful. He has selected portions of history of great intrinsic attractiveness, and, by confining himself within their boundaries, has had ample room and verge enough to do them full justice, — has produced thoroughly elaborated and perfect pictures, that will hang for ever on the walls of the great temple of time. So true are they to fact, and so thoroughly wrought and finished, that subsequent artists will never attempt to improve upon them, but only aspire to rival them by executing equally faithful and beautiful portraiture of other great characters and events. In this way the history of nations, the careers of illustrious actors on the world's stage, and the decisive movements of society, will be preserved and delineated by innumerable writers, whose productions, taken together, will constitute an aggregate result far nobler and better than any one author could possibly achieve in a single comprehensive and extended work.

There is but one other general remark in which we propose, at present, to indulge, suggested by the works of Prescott. It has been frequently observed that foreigners seem to be particularly successful in writing the history of nations, and delineating the characters of eminent public men. The in-

stances of Rabin, Botta, Graham, and others, at once occur to justify the thought. This opens to our view a field of honorable labor and elevated service, particularly offered to the scholars, students, and writers of our own country. We hold peculiar relations to the other nations of the globe, of great interest in this special light. Our people are connected with them by strong and endearing ties. The blood of them all is mingled in our veins,—our fathers gathered here from all their shores. Emigration is still transplanting their several races to our continent, and the experience of America will be a fresh and improved exhibition, on an open field, under favorable circumstances, of a kindred humanity,—a new era in the fortunes of the same races. We have got rid of the encumbrances of the Old World, and by the political union that binds us together, and the still stronger and more intimate social commingling which our liberal system of mutual intercourse is rapidly promoting, we are rescued from the estrangements which the different languages of the European nations and their traditionary alienations have indurated from age to age. Although deriving our lineage from many races and nations, we are one people. With what an advantage can we, from our position, look back over their conflicts and vicissitudes! Having none of the prejudices which are international among them, we can read their history with just and discerning eyes. While our hearts acknowledge the associations that endeared to our ancestors their respective fatherlands, we can survey them all without partiality, treat the great themes of their history with an equal pen, and portray their fortunes without bias or prejudice. America will provide the final historians of Europe. Prescott has led the way. May he long live to realize the purest satisfactions of a scholar, and to execute still further the great service in which he has already accomplished so much, by giving to the world finished and classical pictures of still other prominent passages in the history of Modern Europe. Another accomplished American, having caught his spirit, and nobly emulating his success, has just presented to our view the struggles of freedom in the Netherlands. The history of the grand conflict in England, which resulted in the brilliant era of the Commonwealth, and

from which that nation derived the greatness and the liberties it enjoys to-day, has never yet been written, and can be written only by an American republican, — a glorious task in reserve for some scholar and patriot yet to appear.

We have been led to these thoughts by contemplating the volumes already printed of Prescott's Philip the Second. Our intention was only to discharge — what our readers would blame us for neglecting — our duty as literary journalists, by uniting our commendations with those with which they have everywhere been received, without waiting, as was our original purpose, for the publication of the remaining volumes.

Of the merits of this particular work, we have only to say, that they equal those of its predecessors. The style is, if anything, more easy and fluent, and all the parts show the same thorough preparation, and uniform polish and finish. Besides the great characters of Charles V. and Philip II., there are many others presented in an attractiveness of portraiture not easily paralleled. The Duke of Alva and Don Carlos are drawn to the life. The terrible effects of the Roman Catholic fanaticism upon the men and condition of the times are exhibited in private cruelties and public despotisms that shock the sensibilities of every humane heart; and the awful lesson of ecclesiastical power controlling the course of governments is impressed upon the mind in the deepest characters. The forms of life in elevated circles, the intrigues of courts, the whole system of feudal ceremony, pride, and pageantry, and the military force to which society was subjected in that age, are described with great clearness and felicity of expression. The chapters on the Knight's Hospitallers of St. John and the Siege of Malta are particularly interesting, and, like many other portions of these volumes, will undoubtedly always be ranked among the finest passages of modern history.